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When Pride Punched Me

Gay isn't what I'd bargained for

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Diversity is pervarsity.

That's what the sign across the street said. It was handwritten on white poster board in washable red marker, the kind kids color with, and stapled to a recycled two-by-four. The scrawl resembled a child's but belonged to a middle-aged man in weathered flannel and work boots. He was standing in front of a church on Colfax Street in downtown Denver.

"It's an abomination!" he shouted, joined by a chorus of equally unkempt characters carrying equally crude signs. I've seen the same ones over and over again since: *AIDS Is God's Cure for Gays*, *God Hates Fags*, and, my personal favorite, *Adam & Eve, Not Adam & Steve*.

There was a crowd of ten or fifteen men and women, none under the age of 30. A few of them carried Bibles. One even had a megaphone through which he was reading passages of that good book, all tongue and gums.

What he and his friends lacked in teeth, however, they made up for in enthusiasm. If I'd been in the market for damnation, I'd have been an avid and willing customer.

My side of the street existed on another planet entirely. There were hundreds of us. We had pretty rainbow flags and topless men with abdominal muscles. We had lesbians with condom balloons and suburban parents with buttons that said, "I love my gay son." We didn't have a megaphone, but we had stereos singing with high-energy techno beats. We had drag queens impersonating Cher, Madonna and other women with reverential, one-word names. We had pride.

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It was my inaugural parade, my first public appearance as a homosexual. Looking across the street, at the dandruff and the scowls, I could actually see the ignorance wafting through the air. It smelled like cigarettes and pork rinds. We, however, smelled clean, like fresh linens and shampoo.

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I was proud, of myself and of my newfound community. I felt like a queer Quasimodo, coming into the light. So I shut out the megaphone and focused on the bass.

Gay wasn't what I'd bargained for. Turns out it's more than good music and pretty boys. So much more. Along with designer cologne and hair gel, gay is uncomfortable social situations with co-workers and friends. Along with six-pack abs and appletinis, gay is homophobia and the vast Right Wing. Along with Elton John and Ellen DeGeneres, gay is Fred Phelps and Dr. Laura. Along with pride, gay is shame.

I remember walking through Boystown with my friend Jason shortly after I moved to Chicago. We were just walking. Perhaps with a slight swish, but still, just walking. A yellow school bus drove by and a fat little girl stuck her fat little face out the window and pointed her fat little finger at us.

"Fags go to hell!" she wailed as the bus sailed by.

"Cunt!" Jason yelled back. This fourth grader called a 20-year-old man a fag and he called her a cunt. What the hell? The wheels on the bus go tsk tsk tsk, I thought.

Since then, gay has exploded into the mainstream like a popular brand of shoe or those ghastly trucker hats. Instead of the closet we have "Queer As Folk," "Will & Grace" and "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy." We also have Lawrence v. Texas, marriage in Massachusetts and, for all the good it's done us, a lesbian's father in the White House. I am proud of all these things, the ridiculous and the important, the stereotypical and the surprising.

But there are days when I'm incapable of pride, when little girls call me names and I'm reminded that my self-esteem is worthless without the world's respect. There are days when I feel like an ant under society's boot sole.

When I read the editorials in the paper about gay marriage, or when I overhear my peers debating gay rights in the same tone of voice they use to discuss summer blockbusters, I get a stomachache.

I bruise when I witness the president of the United States insist that gay unions will undermine the institution of marriage. I flinch when ABC News suggests that Matthew Shepard's murder was not, in fact, a hate crime. I sweat when I read the latest research on the biological origin of homosexuality. It makes me feel as though my sexuality requires a ten-step program.

When I watch political debates in which the candidates discuss gay rights as a distraction rather than a legitimate issue, I want to stand up and say, "Hello! I'm in the room! Have the decency to at least *pretend!*" I wanted to say it on October 5, 2004, when Vice President Dick Cheney and Senator John Edwards debated one another in Cleveland. Edwards responded to a question from the moderator about gay rights.

"We ought to be talking about issues like health care and jobs and what's happening in Iraq, not using an issue to divide this country in a way that's solely for political purposes," he said. I'm sorry that my civil rights, Mr. Edwards, distracted you from your campaign.

In moments like these, my pride falls prey to neglect.

Gay pride. Gay rights. It's tiring trying to have one without the other.

I spent my most recent Pride standing in an overcrowded bar with my ex-boyfriend. We'd just broken up, but thanks to the mandates of our lease we still lived together. We'll still be friends, we insisted. My silent treatment suggested otherwise.

Outside, the parade floats rolled down Halsted Street. Topless men in Speedos, fag hags in pasties, drag queens in stilettos, dykes on bikes. The whole cast of characters was there. Inside, my shoes were sticking to the crusty cocktails spilled on the floor and my elbows were sticking to the annoying tourist next to me, who kept pushing his way toward the window for a better view of the parade.

I felt neither pride nor shame. I just felt tired. Gay marriage sounded like a prison after my breakup and gay rights sounded like a farce in the middle of this circus of sequins and skin. Maybe I should get a girlfriend, I thought.

I didn't see any pickets, but on the way home I heard a megaphone broadcasting those tired verses of the Bible. I kept on walking. And as I did, I thought about my first parade. Since then, I'd opened my ears to the megaphones. Maybe I'd just heard words such as *diversity* and *pride* too often to believe in them anymore. Maybe in letting myself become a political platform I'd forgotten I was a person. Or maybe I was just really pissed off. Whatever it was, I'd lost something special--and I missed it. In that instant, my pride punched me in the face.

Gay isn't what I'd bargained for. It's so much more.

So let the megaphones blare. Let the kids call us names. Let the president curl up with his "institutions" and let his challengers pretend they're my friends. I'll always be proud.

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